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STATE FOR G - MELINE
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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [KFLU](#) [SENV](#) [PM](#)

SUBJECT: PANAMA COORDINATES RESPONSE TO AVIAN FLU THREAT

This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On May 31, 2006, a broad range of GOP ministries and NGOs met to coordinate efforts on Panama's Avian Influenza (AI) National Prevention and Response Plan. Participants included officials from the Ministry of Health (MINSA), Ministry of Agricultural Development (MIDA), the Panamanian-United States Commission for the Eradication and Prevention of Screwworm Disease (COPEG), USDA/APHIS, USAID, the Panamanian Audubon Society, the Gorgas Memorial Institute (GMI), the International Regional Organization for Agroindustry Health, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, the National Association of Panamanian Poultry Producers (ANAVIP), and the United Nations Food and Animal Organization (FAO). The meeting was sponsored by APHIS and COPEG. Participants discussed coordination plans for use of FAO grants for AI detection and response, H5N1 virus diagnostic detection capabilities, upcoming AI seminar and simulation exercises, and a coordinated public AI communication strategy. Comment: Panama is increasingly focused on addressing the AI threat. There is a genuine interest in developing an integrated coordinated AI strategy that could perhaps serve as a model for AI preparedness for others in the region. End Summary.

FAO Offers Regional Grants on AI

¶2. (U) FAO's resident representative, Merilio Morell, discussed the FAO's \$500,000 in matching grants for AI projects in Central America. The grants are to assist Central American countries to collect and share information related to the high pathogenic version of AI. The funds are also designed to strengthen each country's national AI preparedness and response plan which respect to detection of the H5N1 virus in migratory birds and commercialized wild birds. Morrell said the proposed grants are subject to change based on comments from the participating countries. Morell said that MIDA is coordinating the GOP's current review of an FAO proposal for AI work in Panama.

Panama's Diagnostic Lab Offers Unique Capability to Region

¶3. (SBU) Panama has the only laboratory in Central America capable of real-time detection of the H5N1 virus. The facility is located at Diagnostic Laboratory for Vesicular

Diseases (LADVIES). The facility was funded in part by APHIS. The technicians were trained at the APHIS facility in Ames, Iowa. Meeting participants were concerned about the need to ensure adequate bio-security measures regarding samples entering Panama for testing. APHIS officials stressed that the handling of samples in LADVIES conforms to protocols employed by US laboratories. Comment: Meeting participants are aware that Panama might become the regional testing center for H5N1 infected material. In the event of an AI outbreak in the region, news of Panama serving as a regional testing center could prompt public fears about the handling of infected tissue. Such fears could cause the GOP to put a halt to such testing at a time when such testing is most needed. End comment.

Regional Seminar and Simulation Exercise Planned for July

¶4. (U) COPEG announced that it will conduct an AI seminar and simulation exercise July 25-28, 2006 in Panama. With financial supported from APHIS, this event will focus on diagnostic techniques in animals, followed by simulation exercises for animal health officials and a separate simulation for veterinary field workers.

Focus on Effective Social Communications Strategies

¶5. (SBU) Meeting participants discussed the importance of effective social communications in the event of an AI outbreak. In suggesting that information on AI would be more credible and consistent if it came from the government rather than private sources, ANAVIP argued that MINSA and MIDA should serve as Panama's sole information providers on AI issues. ANAVIP plans to organize public informational events with members of MINSA and MIDA and may also reach out to doctors on AI issues.

Draft MOU Faces Uncertain Response

¶6. (SBU) To strengthen inter-ministry and NGO cooperation on AI issues, COPEG drafted a memorandum of understanding (MOU) outlining each ministry's and NGO's responsibilities and obligations to support the Panama's National AI Prevention and Response Plan. However, although most participants agreed in principle on the need for some written mechanism, several were reluctant to commit their agencies to anything that might be construed as a legally binding agreement. To date, it does not appear that any ministry or NGO has signed the proposed MOU.

Comment: AI Offers Vehicle for Enhanced Coordination

¶7. (SBU) Panamanian government agencies, NGOs, and some private sector players are increasingly focused on AI preparedness. (As reported septel, HHS Secretary Leavitt's June 7-10 visit helped significantly in boosting the AI issue on the radar of senior GOP officials and the general public.)

We are encouraged to see this effort to break through institutional barriers, as well as the growing recognition that handling an AI outbreak requires adequate social communications, as well as preventing or treating the actual disease. Post will continue to encourage this trend on both the human and animal health fronts (e.g., through COPEG). As Panama advances toward a more fully integrated preparedness and response plan, its efforts could serve as a model for the region. End Comment.

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